

## Pasts to Remember

Shatrugun spots the boy in the crowd; he is standing under a breadfruit tree at a distance from the watchers. All at once his hair turns to resin, his arms become boughs and his feet sprout roots that are driven miles into the earth. . . . Drive your roots deep enough and you end up in infinity, says the breadfruit tree. . . . But infinity does not nourish, retorts the boy-tree, and promptly withdraws his roots to a patch of land beneath the breadfruit tree. And then his roots are too close to the surface and he reverts to the condition of a boy-farmer with feet, and is instantly seasick.

—Sudesh Mishra in *Lila*

IN AN EARLIER publication (1993), I offered a view of ourselves that is more optimistic than the currently prevailing notions of our present and future as peoples of Oceania. That view is tied to my firmly held belief that all social realities are human creations—and that if we fail to construct our own realities other people will do it for us. It can be said that this concern is much ado about nothing. I wish that this were true, but it is not. People with powerful connections have presented us in certain ways that have influenced our self-perceptions and the ways in which we have been perceived and treated by others. Sir Thomas Davis, former prime minister of the Cook Islands, was a prominent Pacific Islands regional leader in the 1970s and 1980s. In his book *Island Boy*, he offers a telling statement of what could happen when we accept other people's representations of us:

Because we believed it when we were told that small Pacific Islands States could never make a go of it without largesse from their former colonial masters, we did not try very hard to see the possibilities from our own points of view which had to be quite different from theirs [Australians' and New Zealanders']. . . . We, therefore, accepted largesse as a right, without questioning

the matter any further, and without the thought that some day it may not be forthcoming. [1992, 305]

As I said at the beginning, I have tried to deal with aspects of our present and future. I propose now to look into our past. I believe that in order for us to gain greater autonomy than we have today and maintain it within the global system, we must in addition to other measures be able to define and construct our pasts and present in our own ways. We cannot continue to rely on others to do it for us because autonomy cannot be attained through dependence.

Intermittently in the 1980s and through to the very early 1990s, I followed the discussions of ideas propounded by certain anthropologists about the constructions of the past and the politics of culture.<sup>1</sup> What these cultural constructionists are doing is what we have been doing all along—that is, constructing our pasts, our histories, from vast storehouses of narratives, both written and oral, to push particular agendas. One of the more positive aspects of our existence in Oceania is that truth is flexible and negotiable, despite attempts by some of us to impose political, religious, and other forms of absolutism. Versions of truth may be accepted for particular purposes and moments, only to be reversed when circumstances demand other versions; and we often accede to things just to stop being bombarded, and then go ahead and do what we want to do anyway.

But cultural constructionists of a certain persuasion have gone beyond the bounds by arrogating to themselves the role of final arbiters of what is true or false in our societies: true history, false history; genuine culture, spurious culture. It is a new hegemony, or perhaps it is the old one in a new guise. Our chiefs and other leaders have been doing it, but we have ways of dealing with this sort of thing. Our freedom lies in the flexibility in all kinds of discourses on the nature of our societies and on the directions of our development. There are no final truths or falsehoods, only interpretations, temporary consensus, and even impositions, for particular purposes. Cultural constructionists aim to control and direct our discourses on our own affairs, which is unwarranted. It is also potentially dangerous, for these scholars could be politically influential, as Haunani-Kay Trask (1991) has asserted.

Until recent years with the rise into prominence of historical anthropology and ethnographic history, there has been a near-total domination of the scholarly reconstructions of our pasts by the Canberra school of Pacific

historians. From their works we can see that fundamental to the conceptualisation and writing of our histories is the division of our past into two main periods: the precontact and postcontact periods. The determining factor for this is the presence of Europeans with their traditions of writing and recording. Many years ago, while visiting a rural community in Papua New Guinea, I was invaded by a particularly virulent kind of lice. Some people call them crab lice, but these looked more like giant lobsters. I went to a nearby hospital run by a group of missionary sisters, one of whom told me in a serious and concerned manner to be very careful, for any slight body contact with the local inhabitants would cause much misery. Since then I have always associated the word "contact" with nasty infections. As used by historians and other scholars the term is very apt; it describes accurately the first and early encounters between Oceanians and European sailors as carriers of dangerous diseases that wiped out large proportions of our populations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within one hundred years the indigenous population of Hawai'i, for example, was reduced by more than ninety percent. There was a real concern towards the end of the nineteenth century that we would vanish from the face of the earth because of such rampaging diseases. Ironically, a major concern in the twilight years of the twentieth century was that there were too many of us around.

Marxist sociologists, who began arriving at our university in the early 1980s, would not use the term "contact" because of its capitalist association. Instead they introduced a beautiful substitute, "penetration," as in "capitalist penetration of the Pacific" or "get penetrated." This is also a very apt term for it connotes consummation without mutual consent. We should get rid of these words and use better ones like "meet," "encounter," and so on.

The point is that for Pacific scholars the main factors for the reconstruction of our pasts are events determined by Euro-American imperialism. Our histories are commonly structured on the temporal division of the past into precontact, early contact, colonial, and postcolonial or neocolonial periods. In this formulation, Oceania has no history before imperialism, only what is called "prehistory": before history. In many if not most of our history books, more than nine-tenths of the period of our existence in Oceania is cramped into a chapter or two on prehistory and perhaps indigenous social organisation. These comprise a brief prelude to the real thing: history beginning with the arrival of Europeans. As it is, our histories are essentially narratives told in the footnotes of the histories of empires.

For those of us who want to reconstruct our remote and recent pasts in our own images—for the purpose of attaining and maintaining cultural autonomy and resisting the continuing encroachments on and domination of our lives by global forces aided and abetted by comprador institutions—this kind of history is a hindrance. Although it is very useful, even essential, for the understanding of vital aspects of our heritage, it is a hindrance in that it marginalises our peoples by relegating them to the roles of spectators and objects for transformation into good Christians, democrats, bureaucrats, commercial producers, cheap labourers, and the like. It does not see them as major players in the shaping of their histories. The main actors are explorers, early traders, missionaries, planters, colonial officials, and so forth.

Pacific histories also marginalise almost all our pasts by considering them not history, merely prehistory, to be dealt with by folklorists and a dwindling number of archaeologists and linguists. It can be argued that we really do have no history before imperialism. I cannot accept that, because we can argue that the much maligned oral narratives are as reliable or unreliable, biased or unbiased, as are written documents for sourcing history. We do know that all sources are contestable; otherwise history is complete and closed, which is nonsense. Every generation rewrites its history, as the saying goes. Besides, mainline history is only one way of reconstructing the past, which has no existence without reference to the present. How one reconstructs the past, as history or whatever, is a political act—a choice from valid alternatives made for particular purposes.

When you view most of a people's past as not history, you shorten very drastically the roots of their culture or even declare their existence doubtful. It is not surprising, then, that many academics hold the view that the peoples and cultures of Oceania are inventions of imperialism. This view has attained the status of truth only because people have been sidelined from their histories and conceptually severed from most of their pasts. It has been used to frustrate our endeavours to attain autonomy by characterising most of what we say or do as being borrowed from the "dominant culture"—as if borrowing is unique to us. As far as I know, our cultures have always been hybrid and hybridising, for we have always given to and taken from our neighbours and others we encounter; but the "dominant culture" is undoubtedly the most hybrid of all, for it has not just borrowed but looted unconscionably the treasures of cultures the world over. Like cultural constructionism, the prevailing Pacific historiography is hegemonic. With only minor concessions it admits of no other than mainline historiography.

Having identified the problem, we may ask: Where do we go from here? What should we do? If we are to go beyond adding our viewpoints to history as usual, we have to devise other methods, using our own categories as much as possible for producing our histories, our cultures. We could learn from the works of ethnographic historians and historical anthropologists, as well as from mainline historians, but we Oceanians must find ways of reconstructing our pasts that are our own. Non-Oceanians may construct and interpret our pasts or our present, but those are their constructions and interpretations, not ours. Theirs may be excellent and very instructive, but we must rely much more on ours. The rest of this chapter suggests some ideas for getting the ball rolling.

We may begin with delineating a new temporal dimension of history by doing away with the division of the past in which most of it lies outside history. Our histories did not begin with the coming of Europeans. If we continue to rely mainly on the works of archaeologists, linguists, botanists, zoologists, and the like for the reconstruction of our remote pasts, we will still be trapped with our pasts as prehistory. We must resort very seriously to our ecologically based oral narratives. Most historians, nurtured on written records and other kinds of concrete documentation as their primary sources, are leery of oral narratives, which they take to be free-floating tales disconnected from the physical world, impossible of verification, and therefore outside their purview.

A few years ago I came across the work of an Oceanian historical anthropologist, 'Okusitino Māhina, who argued very strongly that ecologically based oral traditions are as valid sources for "academic history" as are written documents (see Māhina 1992). As I read Māhina's work, which is an entire history based largely on oral traditions backed wherever possible with the findings of archaeology and related disciplines, it dawned on me that here in the making was a new Pacific historiography by an Oceanian scholar. A few historians may be working along similar lines, but it is significant that Māhina's background is anthropology, the discipline that has spearheaded the rethinking of Pacific historiography. The point at issue here is whether there are legitimate histories apart from mainline history. If there are, and I believe that there are, then our histories are as old as our remembered pasts.

Human events occur as interactions between people in time and space. First we look at people. In our reconstructions of Pacific histories of the recent past, for example, we must clear the stage and bring in new characters. We

bring to the centre stage, as main players, our own peoples and institutions. For this purpose we lay to rest once and for all the ghost of Captain Cook. This is not a suggestion to excise him entirely from our histories—far from it. Others, especially in New Zealand and Australia, will still consider him a superstar, so he will be looming large on the horizon. As for us, we merely send Captain Cook to the wings to await our summons when it is necessary to call in the Plague, and we may recall him at the end to take a bow. As long as this particular spirit struts the centre stage, our peoples and institutions will remain where they are now: as minor characters and spectators. Once we sideline Captain Cook it will be easier to deal with other and lesser intruders. As long as we rely mainly on written documents, and as long as Europeans, Americans, and similar others are seen to dominate our pasts as main actors or manipulators of local people to carry out their designs, our histories will remain imperial histories and narratives of passive submission to transformations, victimisations, and fatal impacts. There have been tragic and awful victimisations. But from a long-term perspective, which is the best kind of historical outlook, what is of more importance is how people, ordinary people, the forgotten people of history, have coped and are coping with their harsh realities, their resistance and struggles to be themselves and hold together. Patricia Grace's brilliant novel, *Cousins* (1992), is the best record I have yet read of how an ordinary Oceanian family struggles to maintain its coherence in the face of adversity. Until relatively recently, Pacific histories have generally been silent on resistance and the struggles to cohere that went on, mostly unnoticed, through decades of domination and exploitation. Even in the late 1960s, Hawai'i and New Zealand were still touted as societies of multiracial harmony.

In order to bring to centre stage grassroots resistance and other unnoticed but important events for our peoples, we must refocus our historical reconstructions on them and their doings. The new knowledge and insights we might gain from this reversal of historical roles could open up new and exciting vistas. Let others do their reconstructions of our pasts; we have dialogue with them, we form alliances with some. But we must have histories—our roots and identities—that are our own distinctive creations.

After we look at the people, we introduce into our historical reconstructions the notion of ecological time, which is perhaps both the egg and the chicken to a marked emphasis in our traditional notions of past, present, and future. Our modern conception of time stresses linear progression in which the past is behind us, receding ever further, while the future is

ahead, in the direction of our progression, which is an evolutionary process leading to ever higher and more advanced forms. Let it be clear that by “linear progression” I include the notion of cumulative development or modernisation, which is equated with progress towards the capitalist utopia, the dream of the wretched of the earth. Lineality was not absent in our traditional notions. In fact it was particularly strong in Central and East Oceania,<sup>2</sup> where it featured in genealogies, especially those of high chiefs and their deeds. Histories obtained from genealogies have a lineal emphasis, and they are also aristocratic histories. In West Oceania, where genealogies were relatively shallow, lineality was expressed in other ways. Oceanian lineality, however, was neither evolutionary nor teleological, but sequential; it had much to do with assertions of rights for succession and inheritance, not, perhaps ever, with evolutionary development as we know it.

We can see our traditional nonlinear emphasis in the languages of Austronesian-speaking peoples, which locate the past in front and ahead of us and the future behind, following after us. In her remarkable book *Native Land and Foreign Desires*, Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa says:

It is interesting to note that in Hawaiian, the past is referred to as *Ka wa mamua*, “the time in front or before.” Whereas the future, when thought of at all, is *Ka wa mahope*, or “the time which comes after or behind.” It is as if the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present-day dilemmas. Such an orientation is to the Hawaiian an eminently practical one, for the future is always unknown, whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge. It also bestows upon us a natural propensity for the study of history. [1992, 22–23]

In the Fijian and Tongan languages, the terms for past are *gauna i liu* and *kuonga mu’a*, respectively—*gauna* and *kuonga* meaning “time” or “age” or “era,” and *liu* and *mu’a* meaning “front” or “ahead.” When Fijian and Tongan preachers or orators point their fingers to the past, they never say *gauna i liu* or *kuonga mu’a* and point to the back; they say the appropriate term and point ahead. The conception of the past as ahead or in front of us is not a mere linguistic construction. It has an actual historical basis in the documentation of our oral narratives on our landscapes. I shall say more on this later.

The terms *liu* and *mu’a* may be used as verbs—as in *au sa liu* and *teu*

*mu’omu’a*, meaning “I am going ahead of you,” or more graphically in the popular Fiji English, “I am taking the lead,” which is the literal translation of *au sa liu*. The past then is going ahead of us, leading into the future, which is behind us. Is this, then, the case of the dog chasing its tail? I believe so. From this perspective we can see the notion of time as being circular. This notion fits perfectly with the regular cycles of natural occurrences that punctuated important activities, particularly those of a productive and ritual/religious nature that consumed most of the expended human energy in the Oceanian past and still do in many parts of our region today. This is ecological time, an idea that we could use for the reconstruction of many of our histories. I shall return to this point shortly. But let me say here that the English language incorporates this notion of past as “ahead” and future as “behind,” as in “let us pay tribute to those who have gone before us,” and “the generations that are coming behind us.”<sup>3</sup> But the main emphasis in the Western and hence our modern notion of time is not circular, except in Christian calendrical rituals and festivals, but rather linear, progressive, and teleological, which might have been strengthened immeasurably by the rapid changes that have occurred since the industrial revolution.

That the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps us retain our memories and be aware of its presence. What is behind us cannot be seen and is liable to be forgotten readily. What is ahead of us cannot be forgotten so readily or ignored, for it is in front of our minds’ eyes, always reminding us of its presence. Since the past is alive in us, the dead are alive—we are our history.

Where time is circular, it does not exist independently of the natural surroundings and society. It is very important for our historical reconstructions to know that the Oceanian emphasis on circular time is tied to the regularity of seasons marked by natural phenomena such as cyclical appearances of certain flowers, birds, and marine creatures, shedding of certain leaves, phases of the moon, changes in prevailing winds, and weather patterns, which themselves mark the commencement of and set the course for cycles of human activity such as those related to agriculture, terrestrial and marine foraging, trade and exchange, and voyaging, all with their associated rituals, ceremonies, and festivities. This is a universal phenomenon stressed variously by different cultures. With its unquenchable thirst for growth propelled by its mighty technologies, however, modern society is disengaging itself from natural cycles, which, as we shall see, is the major factor driving global environmental degradation.

Time is so subsumed under these cycles and other more discrete events that precise dating, which is a main preoccupation of mainline history, is of no importance. In the past, as it is with many people today, it was not so much *when* events occurred but rather *where, how*, and in what *sequences* they occurred that was important. Of course our ancestors did not have the means to date events. This, however, should not unduly concern us, especially when we are dealing with remote pasts. Moreover, when things occur or are done in cycles, dating, which is tied to lineality, is in fact not quite relevant. Now that we have the means for dating we use them; but in our reconstructions, it is broad periods and the social and political implications for the present of remembered pasts that are paramount.

Of equal importance in the consideration of the relationship between Oceanian societies and nature is the role of technology. The driving force that propelled human activities was the knowledge and skills developed over centuries, fine tuned to synchronise actions with the regularities in nature. As it provided the vital link between society and nature, technology cannot be dissociated from either. It was a vital and compatible component of the cycles. This made for balance and continuity in the ecological relationship. "Living in harmony with nature" is a more popular way of putting it. For a genuinely Oceanian historiography, we could use this notion to reconstruct some of our pasts in terms of people's endeavours always to adapt and localise external borrowings and impositions, fitting them to their familiar cycles. In this way they actively transformed themselves rather than just being passively remodelled by others.<sup>4</sup> This has been the case since the early settlement of Oceania; it still holds true for much of our region today. Anthropologists, especially those who worked in the Papua New Guinea highlands in the 1950s and 1960s, have in fact recorded such indigenisations among peoples who had just encountered westerners for the first time. And more recently, growing numbers of anthropologists are writing their works as historical anthropology and historians are writing theirs as ethnographic histories.<sup>5</sup>

But things have not always fitted into familiar cycles, which creates a problem that lies at the core of the study of social change and history. One of the cardinal tenets of modernisation, a notion of linear progression that takes little or no consideration of natural cycles, is the necessity and hence the moral imperative of the *transfer of technology*. Modern technology, conceived of as independent of both nature and culture, can therefore be transferred anywhere in the world unencumbered with natural or cultural bag-

gage. This notion has, on application, wreaked havoc on human lives and nature everywhere. The attempt to transfer high technology as the engine for modernisation to societies that have for ages accommodated themselves to natural cycles of ecological relationships is like leading an elephant into a china shop.

But, it may be asked, what is the relevance of this view of history to the linear processes that presently dominate modern society, worldwide processes driven by transnational capital and the global economy? We have other means of dealing with this kind of situation and must use them. We should, however, keep in mind that we live in societies with most of our peoples dwelling in rural and outer-island communities. Much of their existence involves their endeavours to cope with invasive technologies and adapt them to their familiar cycles. Most of us who are urbanised and living in accordance with the demands of the contemporary global culture still maintain relationships with our nonurban relatives and are therefore entangled in the tussle between tradition and modernity, however defined. Their narratives are therefore ours, as has always been the case before modernisation separated us. For the reconstruction and analysis of historical processes of this kind, we could use the notion of the spiral, which connotes both cyclic and lineal movements.

Most of our remote and so much of our recent pasts are not documented and therefore lie outside the purview of mainline history. We must in that case devise other methods, based on different perspectives of history, to reconstruct such pasts to suit our purposes, including those of maintaining the depths of our roots and strengthening our autonomous identities. We have to bequeath to future generations more memories of our recent past and our present than we ourselves remember of our remote pasts. We must remember and reconstruct as much of our pasts as we can to present to the future.

This is not sentimental nonsense on the part of someone who is getting on in years and reflecting on lost youth and idealised pasts; far from it. Recall Milan Kundera's immortal statement: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." Relationships of power such as those between nations, classes, and other groupings are often characterised by the dominant going out of their way to erase or suppress memories, or histories, and implant what they wish in order to consolidate their control. Take, for example, the history of England and the British Empire taught in colonial schools, in place of local histories, so as to direct

human thought and therefore more easily manipulate the colonised. The near extinction of Celtic languages in the British Isles, and the suppression of New Zealand Maori and Hawaiian languages, were deliberately engineered to destroy memories and cultures and thereby absorb the vanquished more smoothly into the dominant cultures. Fortunately this has not been completely successful. A major feature of the Maori and Hawaiian struggles for sovereignty is the revival of their indigenous languages and histories.

Other examples may also be taken from Central and East Oceania where our aristocracies have for centuries encapsulated most if not all our remembered pasts. Most of our ancient and even our more recent oral histories are about the lives and heroic and horrific deeds of our great chiefs, their families, and kin groups. Our histories, cultures, and group identities are focused almost entirely on them. Without them we have only a few roots, because the lives and deeds of the majority of our peoples have been erased from memory. This is a pillar of the aristocratic power over us. We cherish and respect our connections to our aristocracies, mainly because we have no choice; and for the same reason “we love and respect our oppression,” as a waggish colleague puts it. Nevertheless, they are the major component of our heritage and so we must carry them all, the good and the ugly, for only then can we learn properly from our histories.

In view of this, we have to take careful note of our indoctrination by our contemporary elite groups and ruling classes—of which we, the senior staff of the university, are members. How and for what purposes are we directing our people’s thinking and memories? What do we allow to be taught thoroughly, to be taught only cursorily, or not taught at all, in our schools and other institutions of learning? What do we read or not read, hear or not hear, see or not see in our mass media? Where and wherefore are the silences?

I am reminded here of a piece of advice by Machiavelli to his Prince. It was rather extreme, so I do not advocate its being followed to the letter. Machiavelli said that when you kill someone, kill everyone else connected to him so that no one survives to nurse the memory and plot to do you in.

We cannot therefore have our memories erased, foreshortened, or directed. With weak roots we would be easily uprooted, transplanted, grafted upon, trimmed, and transformed in any way that the global market requires. With little or no memory, we stand alone as individuals with no points of reference except to our dismally portrayed present, to our increasingly marketised national institutions, to international development agen-

cies, international lending organisations, transnational corporations, fit only to be globalised and whateverised, and slotted in our proper places on the Human Development Index. Let Eric Waddell have the final say on this:

I hear the same voices in the Pacific today: “It is forbidden to speak Fijian (Hindi, Cook Island Maori, Samoan, Tongan . . .) in the classroom and the school playground.” Everything must take place in English (or French). On entering the school the child must take leave of his past, his present, his kin. The classrooms and corridors may be decked with flowers, the teachers smiling, the joys immense. But it is like a door which is sealed behind him, so that a new world may be designed afresh, unhindered by the weight of tradition, unmoved by the voices of the ancestors. And in this new world, . . . each child stands alone: small, remote and ultimately helpless. [1993, 28–29]

I submit that this is not confined to our primary schools. It is characteristic of all our formal educational institutions and our workplaces. In our educational programmes we provide our students with materials that for the most part have been produced by people in the United States, Britain, and other leading countries of the global system. Ideas that we impart to our students pertain mainly to these societies, even though they may be projected as universal verities. We and our students digest these notions and then enter international discourses on progress almost always on other people’s terms. We play their games by their rules, and accept the outcomes as inevitable and even morally desirable, although these may be, as they have often turned out to be, against our collective well-being. We are thus eroding whatever is caring and generous in our existence, sacrificing human lives and our natural surroundings in order to be competitive in the world market. We need therefore to be much more inventive and creative than we have been, for our own humane development. Our vast region has its own long histories, its storehouses of knowledge, skills, ideals for social relationships, and oceanic problems and potentials that are quite different from those of large landmasses, in which hegemonic views and agendas are hatched.

In addition, we could use the notion of natural cycles and our traditional ecological relationships to formulate our own philosophies and ideologies for resistance against the misapplication of modern technologies on our societies. We cannot do away with the global system, but we can control aspects of its encroachment and take opportunities when we see them

in order to create space for ourselves. We could, for example, formulate a benign philosophy that would help us pay greater reverence and respect to our natural environment than we do today. I have touched on the development of traditional technologies to link natural cycles and cycles of human activity in enduring, total ecological relationships. As has been pointed out, one of our major contemporary problems is that linear progression is based on systematic and cumulatively destructive deployment of dissociated technology on dissociated nature and society, as required by the global economy. But if we believe that we are dependent on nature to tell us, as it told our ancestors, when and how to derive our livelihood from it, and how to care for it, we would think very hard before meddling with it for short-term advantage, knowing that our actions could break the cycles and probably cause irreparable damage to ourselves. Earlier I said something about the idea of the spiral as a model for historical reconstruction. We could go further and incorporate this notion in the formulation of an Oceanian ecological ideology, tying linear development to natural cycles, with the view of guiding the applications of modern technologies on our environment. Our long-term survival within Oceania may very well depend on some such guidance. Kalani Ohele, a Hawaiian activist, told me something that has been said before but is worth repeating here: "We do not own the land, we only look after it."

This leads us to the consideration of the relationship between history and our natural landscapes. I first came upon this theme in reading 'Okusitino Māhina's thesis, although I later found out that this has been done for Hawai'i and that the New Zealand Maori have been working on it for quite some time. Most of our sources of history are our oral narratives inscribed on our landscapes. All our important traditions pinpoint particular named spots as landing places of original ancestors or spots from which they emerged, as arenas of great and decisive battles, as sites of past settlements, burials, shrines, and temples, as routes that important migratory movements followed, as markers of more localised mobility out of one's own into other people's territories, which made much of the land throughout our islands enduringly contested by parties deploying not only arms but also oral narratives, including genealogies, to validate their claims and counter-claims. Populations seem always to be in flux and so too were the dispositions of land, providing much of the flexibility and motion to the operation of Oceanian societies. All of this is recorded in narratives inscribed on the

landscape. Our natural landscapes, then, are maps of movements, pauses, and more movements.

Sea routes were mapped on chants. Nearly thirty years ago, Futa Helu wrote a series of articles on a particular dance chant, the *me'etu'upaki*, believed to be Tonga's most ancient. The chant is in an archaic form of the language that almost no one today understands, which is taken to be the indication of its antiquity. Helu's translation reveals that it is about a voyage from Kiribati to Tonga. The verses of this chant pinpoint places along the route arranged precisely in their geographic locational sequence.<sup>6</sup> I believe that the chant is the chart of a long and important sea route that people used in the past. I once asked a very knowledgeable seaman how people of old knew sea-lanes, especially between distant places. He replied that these were recorded in chants that identified sequences of landfalls between points of departure and final destinations. Distances were measured in how long it generally took to traverse them. I believe that the Australian Aborigines did roughly the same with their songlines that connected places all across their continent from coast to coast.

Our landscapes and seascapes are thus cultural as well as physical. We cannot read our histories without knowing how to read our landscapes (and seascapes). When we realise this, we should be able to understand why our languages locate the past as ahead or in front of us. It is right there on our landscapes in front of our very eyes. How often, while travelling through unfamiliar surroundings, have we had the experience of someone in the company telling us of the associations of particular spots or other features of the landscape traversed with past events. We turn our heads this way and that, and right ahead in front of our eyes we see and hear the past being reproduced through running commentaries. And when we go through our own surroundings, as we do every day, familiar features of our landscapes keep reminding us that the past is alive. They often inspire in us a sense of reverence and awe, not to mention fear and revulsion.

These are reasons why it is essential not to destroy our landmarks, for with their removal very important parts of our memories, our histories, will be erased. It may be significant in this regard that in several Austronesian languages the word for "placenta" and "womb" is also the word for "land." Among a group of people once well known to me, the Mekeo of Papua New Guinea, the dead were traditionally buried in front of their houses on the sacred ceremonial ground that ran through the centre of their rectangular

villages. The term for the ceremonial ground is *ango inaenga*, the “womb of the land.” The womb nurtures and protects the unborn child, as the land nurtures and provides security for humanity. At the end, the departed are returned to the womb of the land. From the womb we come and to the womb we return. It is a much richer and more ennobling image than “earth to earth, ashes to ashes,” in which there rings an inglorious destiny for our mortal remains.

This very intimate association between history and the natural landscape and between us and our Earth is, I believe, the basis for the oft asserted and maligned notion that we are spiritually and mystically related to the lands to which we belong. It is very difficult for the urban-born and the frequently mobile to comprehend this kind of relationship. They have little or no appreciation of the fact that for very many of us, people and land are indivisible. Indigenous Fijians have always insisted that the word *vanua* means the land and its people. The Tongan terms for traditions and culture are *tala e fonua* and *ulungaanga fakafonua*, the “stories of the land” and “the way of the land,” respectively. People are one with their culture and land. This brings to mind an occasion in the late 1960s when a Tongan extended family was brought to Fiji and resettled on native land in western Viti Levu. It transpired that when the last surviving member of a particular “landowning” lineage passed away, the clan to which the lineage belonged searched for nonresident offshoots and located the only ones in Tonga. These latter were invited to come to the land, awaiting its rightful complements. They belonged to it and vice versa, they went to it, and they are still there today. No one else could have occupied it in the accepted manner. When I bought a house in Suva a few years ago, my colleagues who were from outside Oceania or descendants of more recent arrivals commented on it as an act of property investment. But indigenous Fijian and Tongan colleagues and friends said, without exception, “so you are going to live here forever,” or words to that effect. To some I was acquiring a property, disposable at a good profit at some future date; any improvement I might make on it would enhance its sales value. To others I was establishing a home that would tie me to it forever; any improvement on it would be a further contribution for the benefit of my family and future generations. In saying that I was going to live here forever, my friends meant not just me but also my descendants.

There is a vast difference here that shows diametrically opposed perceptions of our relationship with our world: world as property versus world as lasting home—home as a heritage, a shrine for those who have cared for it

and passed it on to us, their descendants. For those of us who hold this view, our relationship with our Earth is indeed spiritual.

Opponents and even some sympathisers of resistance and sovereignty movements in Oceania and elsewhere frequently express utter contempt for assertions of this kind of relationship, the importance of which is felt most acutely when your ancestral homelands are gone or threatened. I recall having read a statement by a New Zealander who characterised Maori spirituality as so much mumbo jumbo. This could have been an expression born of ignorance, or an unconscious trivialisation of something that is powerfully threatening. I once met a very liberal-minded person in Australia who talked of Aboriginal spirituality in a manner that was perfectly correct and no more. At least she was trying to come to grips with it. Whatever others may say, we need to include in our philosophy of reverence for nature a strong element of spirituality that we may borrow from our pasts or other people’s pasts, or even invent for ourselves, because our Earth is being subjected to intolerable pressures.

To remove a people from their ancestral, natural surroundings or vice versa—or to destroy their lands with mining, deforestation, bombing, large-scale industrial and urban developments, and the like—is to sever them not only from their traditional sources of livelihood but also, and much more importantly, from their ancestry, their history, their identity, and their ultimate claim for the legitimacy of their existence. It is the destruction of age-old rhythms of cyclical dramas that lock together familiar time, motion, and space.

Such acts are therefore sacrilegious and of the same order of enormity as the complete destruction of all of a nation’s libraries, archives, museums, monuments, historic buildings, and all its books and other such documents. James Miller (1985), the Australian Aboriginal educator best known for his book *Koori*, told me that his people, the Wonnarua, who once occupied the Hunter Valley all the way down to the central coast of New South Wales, have a history that dates back only to the beginning of the British settlement. Their lands are gone, and only a handful of the words of their original language are still in use. They have no oral narratives, no memory whatsoever of their past before the invasion and obliteration of their ancestral world.

We, who are more fortunate, cannot afford to believe that our histories began only with imperialism or that as peoples and cultures we are the creations of colonialism and Christianity. We cannot afford to have no

reference points in our ancient pasts—to have as memories or histories only those imposed on us by our erstwhile colonisers and the present international system that seems bent on globalising us completely by eradicating our cultural memory and diversity, our sense of community, our commitment to our ancestry and progeny, and individualising, standardising, and homogenising our lives, so as to render our world completely open for the unfettered movement of capital and technology. We must therefore actively reconstruct our histories, rewrite our geography, create our own realities, and disseminate these through our educational institutions and our societies at large. This is absolutely necessary if we are to strengthen our position for surviving reasonably as autonomous peoples within the new international order.

We, who are more fortunate, cannot afford to let our own compradors continue to conspire with transnational corporations and others to strip and poison our lands, our forests, our reefs, our ocean. Many of the critical problems that we confront today are consequences of acts, such as large-scale land deals, committed by our very own ancestors. We must be careful not to continue repeating similar acts, thus bequeathing to future generations a heritage of misery. We cannot talk about our spiritual relationship with Earth while allowing ourselves and others to gut and strip it bare.

We need to strengthen cultures of resistance within our region. For generations, our peasantries have resisted many if not most introduced “development projects” simply through noncooperation or through withdrawal of support as soon as they realised the harmful implications of such projects for their lives. In more remote eras our ancestors devised very effective and at times drastic methods of political resistance. For instance, the greatest fear of high chiefs in the past was the ever-present threat of assassination. The heads of despots everywhere in Oceania were taken regularly, in a literal and figurative sense. The Tu’i Tonga, for example, were so often taken care of that they created a lower paramountcy to be a buffer between them and an oppressed and enraged population. Series of assassinations of these officials compelled them to establish an even lower paramountcy to take the heat. And so it went. And so we must follow and resist the erosions, the despoliations, and the exploitations that are going on in our region. We owe this much to ourselves and to the future.

I conclude with the following reflection on past, present, and future. Wherever I am at any given moment, there is comfort in the knowledge stored at the back of my mind that somewhere in Oceania is a piece of earth

to which I belong. In the turbulence of life, it is my anchor. No one can take it away from me. I may never return to it, not even as mortal remains, but it will always be homeland. We all have or should have homelands: family, community, national homelands. And to deny human beings the sense of homeland is to deny them a deep spot on Earth to anchor their roots. Most East Oceanians have Havaiki, a shared ancestral homeland that exists hazily in primordial memory. Every so often in the hills of Suva, when moon and red wine play tricks on my aging mind, I scan the horizon beyond Laucala Bay, the Rewa Plain, and the reefs by Nukulau Island, for Vaihi, Havaiki, homeland. It is there, far into the past ahead, leading on to other memories, other realities, other homelands.

#### Notes

This essay, first published in Borofsky (2000), evolved from talks delivered as an Oceania Lecture at the University of the South Pacific, October 1994, and at the Pacific Writers Forum, East-West Center, August 1994. The cosponsors of the Pacific Writers Forum, the Program for Cultural Studies, East-West Center, and the Center for Pacific Island Studies, University of Hawai’i, provided large amounts of uninterrupted time to think and write early drafts of this essay. I benefited greatly from discussions with Sudesh Mishra, Nora Vagi Brash, Marjorie Crocombe, and Alberto Gomez outside Lincoln Hall. Vilsoni Hereniko, Geoff White, and Vimal Dissanayake were wonderful organisers, hosts, and stimulating company. Haunani-Kay Trask and Lilikalā Kame‘eleihiwa of the Center for Hawaiian Studies encouraged me to continue writing this essay. Tony Hooper read the original version and gave much-needed constructive comments. I am indebted to them all.

1. See, for example, *Contemporary Pacific*, vol. 1, nos. 1 and 2, 1989; vol. 3, no. 1, 1991.

2. In order to do away with the racial/cultural connotations of the threefold division of Oceania into Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, I have regrouped the region geographically as follows: West Oceania (the islands of New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia); North Oceania (Belau, the Marianas, Guam, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands); Central Oceania (Nauru, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Uvea [Wallis] and Futuna, Fiji, Tonga, Tokelau, Samoa, American Samoa, Niue); East Oceania (Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Pitcairn Island, Rapanui, Hawai’i, Aotearoa New Zealand). Central Oceania is the region of the greatest overlapping and mingling of populations and cultures.

3. Tony Hooper alerted me to this point as well as to Oceanian lineality.

4. At a time when I was fairly despondent about developments in our region, Marshall Sahlins converted me to this view through personal conversations and in a University of the South Pacific 25th Anniversary Lecture he delivered in Suva in early 1993. He has since published this lecture as "Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History" (1993). This is essential reading for all of us who are concerned with the construction of our pasts, with our cultures, and with our future prospects.

5. See the articles by historians and anthropologists in Brij V. Lal (1992), Donald H. Rubinstein (1992), and Robert Borofsky (1994). For an excellent piece of historical ethnography see Geoffrey White (1991). Beautifully written, in accessible language, it is about Santa Isabel in the Solomon Islands.

6. See Futa Helu (1979, 1980). At the December 1994 conference "Pacific History: Deconstructing the Island Group," at the Australian National University, it was pointed out that voyagers from Central Oceania travelled to Kiribati and even as far as Pohnpei.

#### References

- Borofsky, Robert, ed. 1994. *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*. New York: McGraw-Hill
- . 2000. *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Davis, Tom. 1992. *Island Boy: An Autobiography*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- Grace, Patricia. 1992. *Cousins*. Auckland: Penguin.
- Hau'ofa, Epeli. 1993. "Our Sea of Islands." In *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific. Reprinted in *Contemporary Pacific* 6 (1) (1994):148–161.
- Helu, Futa. 1979 and 1980. "Tongan Poetry IV: Dance Poetry." *Faikava* (Nuku'alofa) 4:28–31 and 5:27–31.
- Kame'eleihiwa, Lilikalā. 1992. *Native Land and Foreign Desires*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- Lal, Brij V., ed. 1992. *Pacific Islands History: Journeys and Transformations*. Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, Australian National University.
- Māhina, 'Okusitino. 1992. "The Tongan Traditional History *Tala-ē-Fonua*: A Ver-

nacular Ecology-Centred Historico-Cultural Concept." PhD thesis, Australian National University, Canberra.

- Miller, James. 1985. *Koori: A Will to Win. The Heroic Resistance, Survival, and Triumph of Black Australia*. North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson.
- Rubinstein, David H., ed. 1992. *Pacific History*. Guam: University of Guam Press and Micronesian Area Research Center.
- Sahlins, Marshall. 1993. "Goodbye to *Tristes Tropes*: Ethnography in the Context of Modern World History." *Journal of Modern History* 65:1–25. Reprinted in *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Robert Borofsky. New York: McGraw Hill, 1994.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay. 1991. "Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle." *Contemporary Pacific* 3 (1) (Spring):159–167.
- Waddell, Eric. 1993. "The Power of Positive Thinking." In *A New Oceania: Rediscovering Our Sea of Islands*, edited by Eric Waddell, Vijay Naidu, and Epeli Hau'ofa. Suva: School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific.
- White, Geoffrey. 1991. *Identity Through History: Living Stories in a Solomon Islands Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.